

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 HA-05 OMB-01 TRSE-00 CIAE-00
DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05
PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 /072 W
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R 171909Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6231
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 07820

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PINT, PDEV, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: CURRENT OUTLOOK

REF: LONDON 2998

SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO MINISTER JOHN SMITH, THE GOVERNMENT EXPECTS BOTH THE SCOTTISH AND WELSH DEVOLUTION BILLS TO RECEIVE ROYAL ASSENT BEFORE PARLIAMENT RISES FOR THE SUMMER. HE DOES NOT BELIEVE THE SUBSTANTIVE AMENDMENTS APPROVED IN THE LORDS WILL BE SUSTAINED IN COMMONS AND ULTIMATELY EXPECTS THE UPPER HOUSE TO ACCEDE TO THE WILL OF COMMONS. SMITH ALSO BELIEVES THE SCOTS WILL APPROVE THE BILL OVERWHELMINGLY IN THE REFERENDUM (HE IS LESS CONFIDENT ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THE WELSH REFERENDUM) AND THAT THE SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES MADE A POLITICAL BLUNDER IN DECIDING TO OPPOSE DEVOLUTION IN THE REFERENDUM.
END SUMMARY.

1. THE WALES DEVOLUTION BILL RECEIVED ITS THIRD READING IN COMMONS MAY 9 AND HAS BEEN SENT TO LORDS. ACCORDING TO PRIVY COUNCIL MINISTER JOHN SMITH, THE
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PEERS ARE EXPECTED TO COMPLETE ACTION ON THE SCOTLAND BILL AND RETURN IT TO COMMONS NEXT WEEK. BOTH BILLS, ACCORDINGLY, ARE MEETING THE GOVERNMENT'S SCHEDULE AND, BARRING MISHAP, SHOULD RECEIVE ROYAL ASSENT SHORTLY BEFORE PARLIAMENT RISES FOR THE SUMMER.

2. ALTHOUGH THE LORDS HAVE APPROVED A LARGE NUMBER OF AMENDMENTS TO THE SCOTLAND BILL (AND ARE EXPECTED TO DO THE SAME WITH THE WALES BILL), MOST OF THE PROPOSED CHANGES ARE PROCEDURAL RATHER THAN SUBSTANTIVE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS DECIDED TO ACCEPT VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE NON-SUBSTANTIVE AMENDMENTS IN THE EXPECTATION THAT THIS TACTIC WILL REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF THE LORDS RESISTING COMMONS ON THE SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES. HE AND OTHER GOVERNMENT BUSINESS MANAGERS ARE CONVINCED THE LORDS WILL NOT SEEK CONFRONTATION ON THE DEVOLUTION ISSUE, IF ONLY BECAUSE THEY DO NOT WISH TO BE SEEN BLOCKING THE EXPRESSION OF POPULAR WILL, VIZ. THE PROPOSED REFERENDA. BUT THE TWO BILLS MAY HAVE TO SHUTTLE BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE TWO HOUSES SEVERAL TIMES BEFORE THE LORDS FINALLY GIVE UP. IN SMITH'S JUDGMENT, THE ONLY SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLE TO ENACTMENT OF THESE BILLS IS GETTING A TIMETABLE MOTION APPROVED PRIOR TO CONSIDERATION OF THE LORDS' AMENDMENTS IN ORDER TO PREVENT A FILIBUSTER. WHILE THE VOTE MAY BE CLOSE, SMITH IS CONFIDENT THE GOVERNMENT WILL GET ITS "GUILLLOTINE".

3. COMMENTING ON PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD DEVOLUTION, SMITH NOTED THAT RECENT OPINION POLL DATA SHOWED GROWING POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE BILL IN SCOTLAND AND OPINED THAT ONCE THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN GETS UNDERWAY

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SUPPORT WILL INCREASE FURTHER. CONSEQUENTLY, HE DOES

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NOT BELIEVE THE MINIMUM SUPPORT REQUIREMENT IMPOSED BY ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS WILL BLOCK IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACT. HE IS LESS SANGUINE ABOUT THE OUTLOOK IN WALES, WHERE OPINION ON DEVOLUTION IS MORE EVENLY DIVIDED, BUT THINKS THERE IS A REASONABLE CHANCE THE WELSH WILL RATIFY THE WELSH ACT. SMITH ALSO REFERRED TO THE RECENT DECISION OF THE SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES TO OPPOSE DEVOLUTION IN THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN, SUGGESTING THAT IT WAS A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL MISJUDGMENT. FIRST, HE THOUGHT THE TORIES MISINTERPRETED THE RECENT DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) BY READING IT AS AN INDICATION OF POPULAR DISILLUSIONMENT WITH DEVOLUTION, DESPITE POLL DATA CLEARLY INDICATING THIS IS NOT THE CASE (LABOR READS THE DECLINE IN SNP STRENGTH AS A REJECTION OF THE SNP'S SEPARATIST ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF DEVOLUTION). SECOND, THE TORY CONFERENCE DECISION ACCENTUATED DIVISIONS WITHIN THAT PARTY OVER DEVOLUTION. IF THERE IS A FALL ELECTION (THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT ENVISAGE A REFERENDUM UNTIL THE SPRING OF 1979), THE CONSERVATIVES WILL BE LOCKED IN AN UNEQUIVOCAL ANTI-DEVOLUTION STANCE, AND
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HAVE UNNECESSARILY WEAKENED THEIR PARTY'S COHESION IN AN ELECTORAL PERIOD. THIS, SMITH SAID, WAS NOT ENTIRELY WELCOMED BY LABOR, BECAUSE IT MAY MEAN THAT THE CONSERVATIVES WILL BE UNABLE TO WIN BACK AS MANY OF THEIR FORMER VOTERS WHO SUPPORTED THE SNP IN OCTOBER 1974 AS THE GOVERNMENT HAD HOPED.

4. COMMENT: WHILE SMITH WAS OVERLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE DEVOLUTION BILLS LAST YEAR, HE HAS BEEN ON THE MARK THIS TIME AROUND, AND HIS CURRENT ASSESSMENT IS GENERALLY CONSISTENT WITH THE VIEWS OF OTHER OBSERVERS, INCLUDING ANTI-DEVOLUTIONISTS WITH WHOM WE HAVE BEEN SPEAKING. HIS ASSESSMENT OF THE TORY POSITION IN SCOTLAND MAY BE MORE PROBLEMATIC, BUT IT TOO HAS THE RING OF PLAUSIBILITY.

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